

The Rapture Of The Church

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep..." which is a metaphor for "death" "...lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe..." and we do; "since we believe" "...that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede..." or "go before" "...those who are asleep."

Now here is the rapture described. "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up..." or "raptured" "...together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

In 2 Peter 3:4, Peter says that in the last days—which I believe we are living in right now—people will say, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep..." or "died" "...all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." So in the last days, there will be those who mock, reject and ridicule the doctrine of the coming of the Lord. We are seeing that fulfilled.

Don't listen to the mockers and objectors; Jesus promised to come again. And He will. In John 14:1-4, He said, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house..." or "heaven" "...are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you..." that's the rapture "...to Myself that where I am..." "in My Father's house" "...there you may be also."

So it's the blessed hope of the church that Christ will come and take us to the "Father's house," and we'll be with the Lord forever. It's called "the rapture of the church."

There is so much confusion and misunderstanding of this subject. It's called the rapture, but some object to it and say that the word "rapture" is not found in Scripture. I would say it depends on what Bible you have. If you have a Latin Vulgate translation, the word "rapturous" is in it, and we get our word "rapture" from it.

The word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, but we believe in the doctrine of the Trinity. The word "providence" is not in the Bible, but we believe the Bible teaches about the providential care of God. So the fact that the word "rapture" may not be in the Bible isn't the issue.

In verse 17, the words "caught up" is the Greek word "harpazó." It means "to catch up, to snatch up." It carries with it the idea of "taking away, to carry away." Paul used it in 2

Corinthians 12:2 where it says that he “was caught up to the third heaven.” So this is where we get our word “rapture” from the word “harpazó.”

And there are other objectors who say that the early church fathers did not teach it. The early church fathers are not the final authority; they are a good source of information. The Bible is the authority; not the church, not the church fathers, not the church leaders.

“We stand alone on the Word of God,

The B-i-b-l-e.”

But the early church fathers did teach over and over again what is called “the imminent return of Christ.” The doctrine of imminency means that nothing has to happen before the Lord comes back for His church. No blood moons, no wars, no famines, no earthquakes—none of that has to happen, though they are happening. Those events will happen before the Second Coming. But nothing has to happen before the rapture. I believe the rapture will be at least seven years before the Second Coming. The rapture and the Second Coming are two, different events.

We understand that the Lord is coming, and He will catch us up “to meet the Lord in the air.” So the early church fathers taught the imminent coming of Christ, which is consistent with the doctrine of the rapture of the church.

The rapture is called “a mystery” in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. That means it is not an Old Testament doctrine; you can’t find the rapture in the Old Testament. It might be prefigured in picture, but it is not taught in the Old Testament, because it involves the church, the body of Christ, which started on the day of Pentecost, in Acts 2. That’s when the church was born. The church’s time on earth will be finished when it is raptured and “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air.” And we’ll forever “be with the Lord.”

In the Second Coming, which is a separate, distinct event, we will come back with Christ. In the rapture, we’ll go up to meet Christ and go to heaven and then come back with Christ in the Second Coming, Revelation 19. In the rapture, the Lord catches up and church, and it only involves the saved. In the Second Coming, it will involve unbelievers, who “shall look on Him whom they pierced” (John 19:37). There will be judgment, when He comes back in power and great glory in His Second Coming.

John 14, 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 3:20-21 are all classic, clear references to the rapture of the church. In Philippians 3:20-21, Paul says, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.” So we’ll have resurrected bodies just like the one Jesus had, when He came out of the grave on that first Easter Sunday and rose from the dead.

I want to look at five facts or facets of the rapture of the church. We’ll look at the problem of the

rapture, the pillars of the rapture, the participants of the rapture, the plan of the rapture and the profit of the rapture.

First, let's look at the problem of the rapture, in verse 13. "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren." Someone jokingly said this is the largest Christian denomination in America—the "ignorant brethren." Certainly that is true when it comes to eschatological, future, doctrinal events, including the end times and the coming again of Jesus Christ. The word "ignorant" means "uneducated."

Continuing with verse 13, "...concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope." Paul is referring to non-Christians when he says, "others who have no hope." You don't have to sorrow like a non-Christian when your loved ones die.

There are four, key words in verse 13. They are "ignorant," "asleep," "sorrow" and "hope."

First is "ignorant" or "uneducated." The problem was that Paul had been in Thessalonica for only three weeks with the infant church. He started the church and was building it up in the Word. In three, short weeks, he taught them about end-times prophecy. He taught them about the rapture of the church. He talked to them about the tribulation. He talked to them about the Antichrist. He talked to them about the Second Coming. So he felt it was an important doctrine; even for new believers, to be taught these things.

What happened in the church in Thessalonica was that the Lord had not yet come back and raptured them, but some of their loved ones and other brothers and sisters in the church had already died. So the word "asleep" here refers to those Christians who had died. And the church was upset and distraught.

So Paul was writing these words to explain to them that the souls of those Christians who had died before the rapture are with the Lord. Their soul will come back with the Lord at the rapture, their bodies will be resurrected, reunited with their soul and spirit and all the living Christians will meet them in the air. So the dead in Christ will not be at a disadvantage to those Christians who will be alive at the rapture.

I would like to be alive at the rapture. I'd like to have the uppertaker and not the undertaker. But I can't dictate those terms. I would like to have the rapture happen when I'm preaching on the rapture; that's powerful preaching! I'm longing for the rapture. I believe that every generation of Christians, from the day of Christ and Pentecost to our present day, should long for it, live for it and be motivated by the soon-coming of Jesus Christ. So don't be "ignorant," brethren.

Where do Christians go when they die? 2 Corinthians 5:8 says, "...to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord." So the minute you die as a Christian, you are present with the Lord. Philippians 1:21 says, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." So we go to be with the Lord. And in Philippians 1:23, Paul said, "For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart..." which is death "...and be with Christ, which is far better." So when a

Christian dies, they go immediately to be with the Lord.

Where does a non-Christian go? They go to hell. They are separated from God; there is no hope of salvation. When you die, there are only two places you could go: heaven or hell. So you need to be ready now. You can't get ready after you die; there's no second chance. And once you are in hell, you cannot get out. It behooves us to be ready, to be right with God.

If you haven't trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, trust Him today.

The second key word in verse 13 is "asleep." This is a metaphor for "death." This word is only used for Christians. In the Bible when Christians die, they are referred to as "asleep." And it is only the physical body that sleeps. The Bible doesn't teach the doctrine of soul sleep. Death is not the cessation of existence. When you go to sleep, you still exist. Will you wake up? Hopefully. I love to take naps. Napping is not to be feared. We go to sleep with the expectation that we'll wake up.

Souls don't sleep; only bodies sleep. And Christians are said to be "asleep," because their bodies will one day be resurrected. It'll be "the great gettin'-up morning," when all the dead bodies of those who have died in Christ will be resurrected.

Some people freak out and ask, "Well, what if someone is cremated?" Do you think that's a problem for God?! No; nothing is too hard for God (Jeremiah 32:27). He will resurrect them.

The word "asleep" is a picture of the Christian in death, because we will be awakened, but it's only the body that will be awakened. In John 11:11-14, Jesus said that Lazarus was sleeping, and the disciples said that was good, that if he was asleep, "he will get well." It was dangerous to go to Judea, so they were content to stay away. But Jesus said that "Lazarus is dead," and He was going to him to "wake him up." The metaphor is of a believer's body waiting to be resurrected.

The third key word is "sorrow." This is natural. Paul doesn't say that we shouldn't sorrow; he said that you don't "sorrow as others..." meaning "unbelievers" or "non-Christians" "...who have no hope." There is no hope of ever being reunited with our loved ones outside of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That's why Easter is so exciting; to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Christians, every day is Easter. It's resurrection day. And even though we sorrow—it would be subhuman not to sorrow when someone we love has died—we don't sorrow hopelessly. We know we will be with our loved one again, because Jesus has died and rose again.

The fourth word is "hope." Even in death, we have hope beyond the grave.

Second, let's look at the pillars of the rapture. How do we have hope beyond the grave? How do we know we'll see our loved ones again? Look at verse 14 and the first half of verse 15. "For if..." in the Greek, it means "since" "...we believe..." He's affirming that we "believe" in

Jesus' death and Resurrection "...that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus." At the rapture, He will bring back with Him those Christians who have died. "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord."

There are three, foundational pillars for hope beyond the grave. Number one is the death of Christ, verse 14: "If we believe that Jesus died...."

Do you believe that Jesus died on the Cross? Do you believe that He died for your sins? Do you believe He is the sinless, Son of God, and He substituted His life voluntarily on the Cross? Do you believe that our sins were placed on Him? Do you believe they were paid in full? Remember that He cried, "It is finished!" or "Tatelestai!" (John 19:30) or "Paid in full!" Do you believe His righteousness can be imputed to you, and you can be forgiven and justified before God? So we do believe in the death of Jesus Christ.

Central to Christianity is the Cross of Christ. And that Cross was a voluntary, vicarious, substitutionary atoning death whereby Jesus paid for my sins, so that I can have His righteousness imputed to me by faith.

Number two is the Resurrection of Christ as our foundation for hope beyond the grave or for the rapture. Verse 14 says, "and rose again." So you have the Cross and the empty tomb or the Resurrection. What did He do? He physically, bodily, literally rose from the dead. It wasn't a spiritual or a mystical Resurrection. It wasn't a philosophical concept that He lives in our hearts.

Jesus predicted that He would be crucified and would rise from the dead. And He did. Anybody who can do that deserves our faith and trust. There is hope beyond the grave, because Jesus rose from the dead.

And we will have the same kind of resurrection; our bodies will be resurrected.

Number three is the revelation of Christ, verse 15. "For this we..." Paul includes himself "...say to you by the word of the Lord." This was a direct revelation from the Lord to Paul. It could be alluding to John 14:2-3, where it says, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." He could be referring to 1 Corinthians 15:51 where he says, "I tell you a mystery"; that God revealed it directly to Paul.

We don't know what he's referring to, but we know that Jesus revealed to Paul, who was an apostle and wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the words of the Lord; that He would come again and receive us to Himself, that where He is, we will be also.

So the three pillars are the death of Christ, the Resurrection of Christ and revelation from Christ, which is the Bible, the Word of God.

The most important thing is your foundation. You must build your life on the Word of God. It's so important. Build your life upon Christ, as revealed in Scripture, the Word of God.

My third fact about the rapture is the participants of the rapture, the end of verse 15. "We who are alive and remain..." meaning the Christians who will be living at the time of the rapture "...until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep." So there are two groups who participate in the rapture: those who are alive in Christ, which we would like to be a part of, and those who sleep in Christ. Both the living and the dead Christians will be participants in the rapture of the church. When the Lord comes—and I believe His coming is imminent—we will be "caught up...to meet the Lord in the air."

And be clear about this: those Christians who have died before the rapture are with the Lord. When a believer dies, He goes to be with the Lord. And when the Lord comes back, they'll be with Him. Their bodies will be resurrected and reunited with their soul and spirit. They will get a brand-new body. We all need new bodies.

Romans 8 teaches about the redemption of our bodies. Our bodies aren't redeemed yet; just look in the mirror. We're saved, but our bodies aren't glorified yet. One day we'll have glorious, resurrected bodies.

Who will be raptured? The church, the body of Christ. It's not a denomination, not just an individual or a local church. All true Christians all over the world from the time of Pentecost until the rapture will be "caught up." We are living in the dispensation or the age of grace. The Bible teaches these different dispensations. We live in the church age. Anyone can come by faith—Jew or Gentile who come to faith in Jesus—and become one in the body of Christ. So the church will be raptured.

And I don't believe in a partial rapture. Some people say that if you aren't walking close to the Lord, if you're not "super-spiritual," if you're not part of the "deeper-life club," if you're not praying and fasting and reading the Bible every day, you'll be left behind in the rapture. No. If you're born again, you're in the church. You're either in the church or not in the church. You're either a saint or you ain't. If you're a Christian, you're in Christ. And if you're in Christ, you'll be raptured.

He's not going to leave half His bride here on the earth. He's going to take the Bride to heaven. So if you're saved, you're going to be raptured. Make sure you've believed and trusted in Jesus and been born again. That makes you part of the church, and you'll be raptured.

The fourth facet of the rapture is its plan. It has four parts. Number one is the return of Christ, verses 16-17. "For the Lord Himself...." He's coming back. In Acts 1:11 when Jesus ascended back into heaven, the apostles were watching Him ascend up into a cloud, and an angel said to them, "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." So just as Jesus bodily, physically, visibly ascended back to heaven, He'll come back for the church, meeting them "in the air." 1 Thessalonians 1:10 says that we are waiting "for His Son from heaven."

His return also involves that He "will descend from heaven." So it's very clear where Jesus is right now, and that He Himself will come back. He won't send someone else.

There will be “a shout.” This word “shout” is a shout of command. It’s not just a yell; it’s a command of authority. Just as Jesus said, “Lazarus, come forth,” and Lazarus came out of the grave (John 11:43-44), so the Lord will shout.

And there is “the voice of an archangel.” There is only one archangel mentioned in the Bible, and that is Michael. But there could be other archangels—they’re just not mentioned in the Bible. So we can’t be sure it will be Michael.

There also will be “the trumpet of God.” A lot of people confuse the seventh trumpet of the tribulation when wrath is poured out on the unbelieving world with this “trumpet of God,” in verse 16. Don’t mix up the two. This is the trumpet calling the church. This trumpet is also described in Revelation 4:1 where John said, “The first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here.’” I believe this was referring to the rapture.

Then the tribulation starts in Revelation 6, so the church has already been “caught up.” The church is already in heaven in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 6, the Antichrist shows up and the tribulation begins. So I believe in a pre-tribulation rapture of the church. So the seventh trumpet of the tribulation is not to be confused with the trumpet at the rapture.

Number two in the plan of the rapture is that there will be resurrection involved. “And the dead in Christ will rise first.” This is Paul’s reassuring affirmation. Those who had died, those the Thessalonians were sorrowing over, will be the first to rise at the rapture.

Many have confusion over this. They ask, “How do they rise from the dead if they are already in heaven with the Lord?” This resurrection at the rapture only refers to their physical bodies. Your actual, physical body is going to be redeemed; it’s going to be resurrected. That’s what Paul is referring to. In 1 Corinthians 15:53-55, he said, “For this corruptible...” which is our body “...must put on incorruption, and this mortal...” that’s our body “...must put on immortality....Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” And Paul says, “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?”

What a blessed hope! We’ll have glorified, eternal bodies and will be reunited with our loved ones.

Number three, we move to the rapture of the living, verse 17. “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up...” it’s the Greek word “harpazó” “...together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. In 1 Corinthians 15:52, Paul says that this will happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.”

Number four, verse 17, there will be a reunion. This really blesses my heart. We will be “together with them.” With whom? With our Christian loved ones who have died.

Many times, in over 50 years of ministry, I’ve stood in a cemetery and watched caskets go into the ground. I’ve seen it over and over again. But I’m able to open the Bible, read this verse and comfort hearts that are grieving, knowing that those who you love and are being laid in the

ground will be resurrected, they will come back with the Lord and you will see them again. You will be with them again. You will hug and kiss them again. And you will spend eternity with them and the Lord.

That's the rapture of the church, the blessed hope. Jesus will bring them with Him. We will be "together with them." Our loved ones who died in Christ we will see again.

And where will we meet them? "In the clouds," verse 17. "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." I like that old song,

"There is going to be a meeting in the air

In the sweet by and by.

And all the saints will gather over there

In their home beyond the sky."

What a blessed hope that is!

Then notice the last part of verse 17: "And thus we shall always be with the Lord." "Together with them," we'll "meet the Lord in the air" and we'll forever be with Jesus.

My beloved, I believe the stage is set for the rapture of the church.

The fifth facet of the rapture is its profit, its benefits or its blessings, verse 18. Paul says, "Therefore..." it's a summary "...comfort one another with these words." He's wrapping everything up with these words.

Why would we want to abandon a doctrine that does three things? Number one, it comforts us. What comfort would it be if we were going to go through the tribulation?

Just to get myself stirred up, I watched some videos of people who don't believe in the rapture. One of them said, "The church has suffered all through the church age. They've been persecuted. Right now Christians are dying. Why should we escape?" Why shouldn't we escape?!

What they fail to note is that the suffering, persecution and trouble that the church has gone through for almost 2,000 years comes from the world, the flesh and the devil—not from God! The seven years of the tribulation comes from God. So there are two, different sources.

Yes, we will suffer; we may suffer here in America. Yes, we may be persecuted. Yes, Christians are dying. But the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." What comfort would it be to say, "Well, be

comforted, but you'll have to go through the tribulation." If the Lord wants to take me home, so be it. But He said, "In the world you will have tribulation..." meaning "persecution" ...but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

We're not saying that Christians aren't persecuted. We're not saying that Christians won't die. What we're saying is that they won't experience God's wrath. That happened on the Cross; Jesus paid for that. So I believe we will escape that wrath of God that will come in the tribulation.

Number two, is that the rapture cleanses us. 1 John 3:3 says, "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." So it provokes us to holy living. If you believe God could come at any moment, you're going to live godly lives.

Number three, it compels us. In 1 Corinthians 15:58 Paul said, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." All your service to Christ will be rewarded; it will not be in vain.

So the rapture comforts us, cleanses us and it compels us to live for the Lord.